

We're Running Out of Time

Red China's development of an H-bomb reduces one aspect of the ABM debate in this country to an absurdity.

This has to do with the contention that the United States should not deploy an anti-ballistic missile system until we find out whether the Russians will agree not to expand the ABM system which they have already started. It is said that no consensus on this point was reached at the Glassboro summit session. One report has it that the official Kremlin version of the ABM discussion between the President and Premier Kosygin took an even "tougher" line than Kosygin's.

This argument might as well turn on the question of how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. For the perfectly obvious fact is that neither Russia nor the United States, given the ominous development in Peking, can neglect their missile defenses. Each country must proceed, and we think proceed promptly, with building and deploying the kind of ABM system which is best suited to its own particular security.

At the moment Russia is more directly threatened than we are. In just a few more years, perhaps three or four, China will be able to strike deep into Russia with H-bombs mounted on intermediate-range ballistic missiles. It is possible, of course, that the Chinese will not actually build the bombs and the delivery missiles. But it is foolish to think that the Russians would bet a single ruble on peaceful intentions in Peking. They will be forced to protect themselves with whatever anti-missile system seems necessary.

The case with the United States is not much different. One current esti-

mate is that it will be 1972-75 before China becomes a first-class nuclear power, equipped with enough H-bombs and intercontinental missiles to seriously threaten large areas of our own country. The Chinese might reach this stage sooner, just as they tested their first H-bomb years before many people thought possible. But if one accepts the 1972-75 date, that is only five to eight years away.

How long will it take us to build and deploy even a "thin" ABM defense? Well, Defense Secretary McNamara, who is said to think we have plenty of time to meet a threat from Red China, has also been reported as saying that a "thin" ABM system could be built for about \$3.5 billion by 1975. A Pentagon spokesman, refusing to be more specific, said this week that the job would take "several years." Plenty of time? It seems to us that we are running out of time—and quickly.

The Senate-House Atomic Energy Committee is scheduled to begin closed hearings this week on the ABM argument. For our part, we think a decision is urgent, and if Mr. McNamara really believes we have plenty of time, we hope the committee will press him hard on his reasons for thinking so.

There are many well-informed people who are convinced that too much is at stake to leave a decision on the start of an ABM to one man—Mr. McNamara. And this sentiment was at least implicitly underscored by General McConnell, chief of staff of the Air Force, when he said last week that the real question at stake in the ABM debate comes down to "the difference between our destruction and survival as a sovereign state."